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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000502

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, SA/PD, S/CT, NEA/NGA,
DS/DSS/ITA, DAERCC, INR/NESA, AND IO

NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03-25-13

TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER KPAO PHUM ASEC CE MV IZ

SUBJECT: TFIZ01: Mission presses points re CHR, UN;
Sri Lanka/Maldives reaction continues to be low-key

Refs: (A) State 76597

- (B) Colombo 483 (Notal)
- (C) Colombo 486, and previous
- (D) State 75513

(U) Classified by Ambassador E. Ashley Wills.

Reasons: 1.5 (B,D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Mission is continuing to press points re keeping the Iraq issue out of the CHR and the UNSC/UNGA. Overall reaction in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to the Iraq situation continues to be low-key. Media coverage is heavy, with almost all commentary anti-U.S. Our best educated guess is that the local situation will remain calm barring unforeseen events.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) PRESSING POINTS RE CHR/UN: Mission continues to press Department's points re keeping the Iraq issue out of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and the UNSC/UNGA. In a conversation earlier today (March 25) with Foreign Secretary Rodrigo, Ambassador reiterated Ref D points re the CHR (already passed to the GSL per Ref C). Rodrigo assured the Ambassador that the GSL would not support any effort to put Iraq on the CHR's agenda. (Note: We understand that the Sri Lankan Ambassador in the U.S. has made similar assurances to Department.)

¶3. (C) In response to Ref A points re Arab efforts to place the issue on the agenda at the UN, Rodrigo was a bit more equivocal. He indicated that the government would oppose any effort to raise the Iraq issue at the UN if the GSL had a sense that doing so would lead to name-calling or tendentious discussions in that forum. If plans for a possible discussion seemed to be going in a constructive direction by focusing on humanitarian or other matters, however, the GSL might re-consider and support such a meeting, Rodrigo said. In a second phone call with Rodrigo this afternoon, Ambassador focused again on the Arab League's call for a special session of the UNSC or a UNGA session. Rodrigo confessed to being out of touch with the latest developments, but said Sri Lanka would work to be as constructive as possible.
(Note: Mission has also passed Ref A points to the Maldivian government, which had no response.)

¶4. (C) SRI LANKA REACTION: Overall reaction in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to the Iraq situation continues to be low-key. The "Sri Lankan street" continues to be quiet. As previously reported to SA/INS, there was an anti-U.S. rally after Muslim prayers on Friday, March 21, in Colombo. Muslim parties and organizations, and the radical left Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) party sponsored the rally. Upwards of a thousand or so demonstrators turned up. There was no violence (although a U.S. flag or two were reportedly burned) and the crowd dispersed quickly. There have also been some rallies in other parts of the country, but, again, no reports of violence.

¶5. (C) Mission has not picked up any vibrations that anti-U.S. groups are planning bigger rallies to come. In any case, the government, in line with its stated willingness to protect fully diplomatic personnel and interests, continues to underscore that it is ready to quell any problems provoked by demonstrators.
(Note: See the GSL's relatively constructive March 20 statement re the situation, which is contained in Ref D.) (Note: Also see Septel re Mission's latest Emergency Action Committee meeting.)

¶6. (C) Regarding local political reaction, it is interesting that the main Opposition grouping, the People's Alliance (PA), has not yet issued a coherent policy statement re the Iraq situation, as of this point. Various PA officials have made public statements, some moderate-themed, some extreme, but the party itself has not issued a statement. (Note: On the

extreme side, one third-tier PA official reportedly called President Bush a "war criminal." When Polchief called the official and challenged him about the quote, the PA official clamed up and would not confirm that he had said it.) The PA's lack of a focused reaction could be due to the fact that President Kumaratunga, the leader of the party, has been vacationing in the UK of late and, after postponing her planned return, is not due back in-country until the coming weekend.

(Note: FYI. Re Tamil Tigers' reaction, the group has reportedly made a public statement to the effect that it wished the U.S. had gone through the UN and not attacked Iraq.)

17. (C) MALVIVES REACTION: Based on everything we are picking up, the Maldives is also quiet. We have heard no reports of demonstrations or disturbances of any sort. The government website "Haveeru" contains mainly AFP wire service reports re the situation.

18. (SBU) MEDIA COVERAGE: As has been the case for the past several days, Sri Lanka's newspapers were full of stories re the Gulf situation on March 25. (Note: See Septel media reaction cable for more re the March 25 press. Also see Ref C.) The news coverage continues to be basically straightforward, as are most headlines. (Note: In a particularly egregious exception, the Opposition English-language ISLAND carried a blaring headline on its front-page stating, bizarrely, "Apache Down, Another U.S. Symbol Dented.") In the meantime, editorial and op-ed comment continues to be vociferously anti-U.S.

19. (C) In a March 24 meeting, PAO asked ISLAND editor Gamani Weerakoon about the anti-U.S. coverage. Weerakoon replied that the U.S. should not make too much of it. The majority Sinhalese and minority Tamil communities do not care a wit about the Iraq situation. Some Muslims might care, but they are a small minority, he said. (Note: Muslims are about 8 percent of the population.)

10. (C) COMMENT: Our best educated guess is that the local situation will remain calm barring unforeseen events. If a siege of Baghdad turns particularly bloody, for example, perhaps local concerns will skyrocket. At the same time, if the conflict takes many weeks, perhaps it will begin to hurt pocketbooks in Sri Lanka via higher fuel costs or a decline in remittances from workers in the Middle East. Outside of that, as we have stressed before, Sri Lanka remains largely focused on its own very real problems, most particularly its complex, fragile peace process. END COMMENT.

11. (U) Minimize considered.

WILLS